

Interview with Gale McGee

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR GALE MCGEE

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Do you prefer to be called Senator or Ambassador?

MCGEE: Yes. Anything. I answer to all names. My OAS role was ambassador.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, I wonder if you could give me a little background on yourself and your interest in foreign affairs before you became a senator.

MCGEE: I hesitate to plunge into that, because it goes back a very long way. I was a University of Chicago Ph.D., and that's where it was all triggered. I did it all in the foreign affairs field.

Q: What particular concentration?

MCGEE: I had a concentration in Latin America. I had a lot of it in political science, in the diplomatic area of political science, international political affairs. In fact, thereby hangs the tale of good fortune which may have helped me pass my Ph.D. final orals. My major professor was J. Fred Rippy. I did a lot of Latin America stuff under him in the thesis. But you had to have one outsider on your board, and that turned out to be Hans Morgenthau, University of Chicago man in the beginning. So Hans was an international

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politics specialist. Rippy was an isolationist in the sense of isolating the hemisphere from the real world.

Q: We're talking about the 1930's?

MCGEE: We're talking about the thirties and the forties. That's where they fall into their heaviest role. But the burden of it was that Fred Rippy and Hans Morgenthau got to fighting over how isolated the hemisphere was, Morgenthau arguing that the hemisphere was another linkage in the chain that wraps the whole world together. Rippy was arguing, "Thank God, America first. We're isolated from the embroilments of the old world." And they argued for a substantial portion of the two-hour orals period. So it was the dream of the ordinary candidate for the doctorate. I slipped through between their disagreements, one with the other. But that's where it all started.

Beginning in 1947, I ran an Institute of Foreign Affairs at the University of Wyoming. We brought in dignitaries every summer through a Carnegie Foundation grant that we had for many years which enabled us to run this Institute. Twenty-one teachers from Wyoming high schools were selected each Summer to participate. Then we could have nine outsiders from outside the state in on that. But the idea was that we had a measurable quantity here, because Wyoming has a low population. We had probably maybe 85 or 90 high schools in the state in those days. So by taking 20-25 high school teachers a year for those 12 years that we ran the Institute, until I came to the Senate in 1958, that was an extremely interesting capsule that you could examine in terms of raising the level of international political recognition in a state of approximately 300,000 people in those days. Likewise, in my Wyoming classes between my arrival there in 1947 and the Senate election in 1958, I had had nearly 3,000 students.

Q: I think it's worth discussing here for a minute about this, because this is considered one of the problems for the Foreign Service, that the State Department says, "You know, there are a lot of people out there in the United States, particularly in the Midwest who are not

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along the coast or maybe a border, who have no conception or interest in foreign affairs.” Wyoming would be as good an example, if this is true, that you might think about.

MCGEE: Yes.

Q: Was this true?

MCGEE: It was indeed true when we started, and that's really what triggered the attention of the Carnegie Foundation to make this a pilot project. It was the only thing that was unusual about it from any other sort of grant they might have made. We ran that Institute for 12 years. We had a lot of distinctive people there that came to lecture. One fellow's name was Harry Truman; also we had Eleanor Roosevelt, Hans Morgenthau. The last one before they disbanded it, and just as I arrived in the U.S. Senate, was Henry Kissinger (1958). Every year we had an array of people that already had arrived or were soon to arrive. That was unusual, but as I say, the Carnegie people put up the funds to pay them what in those days was an acceptable honorarium for a week's lecture or a one-night massive lecture and debates on these questions. So it was really a possibility of measuring an impact on public opinion and to raise its level of interest and comprehension of foreign policy problems.

Q: Moving on and moving back, you had a chance to sample how effective your program was. You went to the Senate in 1958. Did you find that your constituents were taking a measurable interest in foreign affairs?

MCGEE: Yes, in two ways. First of all, they understood what I was talking about when we were campaigning for the big issues in the Senate, and re-campaigning for three terms. In other words, we had a higher decibel of understanding of the atmosphere and the attitudes in the world around us, even as we as a nation had been emerging from a century of isolationism after our own Civil War.

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The other thing was that by 1958, by the count of my staffers out there in Wyoming, I had approximately 3,000 former students, scattered around Wyoming and, I have to add, "none of whom had flunked," so that was the McGee machine, you see! What I'm suggesting there is it was massive saturation into every cubbyhole and remote corner, as well as the centers of population in the State.

Q: Did you find that you were getting more interest in foreign affairs than, say, a comparable senator from Idaho or Nebraska?

MCGEE: I would think so in those days. Of course, because of the things that we've all learned since then, that's begun to change. But it was probably more saturation percentage-wise than you would have gotten in even the more metropolitan states, because they had to concern themselves with many times the population. In New York, you have the sophisticated intellectuals. Of course, it was during this period that the factor that probably did more to change most everything in the world, was the invention of instant news, meaning TV. I still think, in hindsight, aside from World War II and Pearl Harbor, without Pearl Harbor, I argue that we probably would have waited too long to take on Hitler; it would have been too late. Our first reaction to Pearl Harbor was to declare war on Germany, and it had little to do with Germany, except we were all debating these things.

Q: Actually, Hitler declared war on us, but it was all a part of the process.

MCGEE: It was that sequence. We were ready to go then. No longer were we a nation divided. It took Pearl Harbor to take care of that, and I still give a little private thanks every chance I get, to the Japanese for having thought up that brilliant stroke! They knew we were lagging behind, you know, and we had to be brought up to date. Thus, that was the great turning point. At the beginning of World War II, we were so sorely divided, it was not only discouraging, it bordered on disaster. I was in the thick of all of that in those days, and I was a Republican. I came from a Republican family, and I cast my first vote for a fellow by the name of Alf Landon!

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Q: Who ran in 1936.

MCGEES: He ran in 1936. I cast my second vote in 1940, after I'd been to college, for Norman Thomas. So that was quite a swing of the pendulum.

Q: He was a Socialist candidate in 1940.

MCGEES: I finally voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt in his fourth term, and then I was down the line from there on. So that's the evolution of an inbred isolationist converting into an internationalist and power political student of world affairs.

Q: When you went to the Senate, could you explain how you got on to the Foreign Relations Committee?

MCGEES: Yes. However you've got to put them in the right order. In those days we regarded the Appropriations Committee as the most powerful committee. Foreign Relations was the sexiest committee, the jazziest, in other words. So the commitment that Lyndon Johnson, the Senate majority leader, made to me, while on the campaign trail in Wyoming in 1958, was "if the people of Wyoming would send Professor Gale McGee to the Senate, I will help him all I can in the Senate."

Q: Lyndon Johnson, at that time, was Majority Leader of the Senate.

MCGEES: That's right. He was very communicative. He told the oil men in Casper, who speak to no one but themselves, (and Lyndon spoke their language) he got 100 of them in the basement of a hotel there and just read them the riot act about their reactionary approach. "If you don't vote for Gale McGee, I say down the drain for all of you! You're worse than we thought." But he said, "If you do send Gale McGee to Washington, I promise you I will put him on the Appropriations Committee the day he arrives."

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Well, they did, and he did. That's how I got on Appropriations. the election of 1958 sent a large class of new Senators to Washington. We had a class of 15 senators, 12 Democrats and three Republicans in 1958, and everybody wanted the best treatment they could get. But I got it from Lyndon on Appropriations.

I didn't get on the Foreign Relations Committee until 1962. Lyndon knew that I had wanted Foreign Relations, but he knew that the clout was in Appropriations. That's why I accepted his advice and that of my colleague Senator Joe O'Mahoney, to take Appropriations at the very beginning.

But by 1962, I was still interested in being on the Foreign Relations Committee. That area was my career in terms of my history background. But up to that point there had been no openings in sight on that committee, no rotations possible, but Lyndon got busy on this as Vice President. What he did, he found a member of the Foreign Relations Committee who didn't like it on there; it was not his bag. The senator's name was Russell Long, from Louisiana. Russell Long would have given anything to be on Commerce, because that's where you had a hand in oil. I was on the Commerce Committee from day one. I didn't particularly care for it, but you had to be on something, and they put me on Commerce. So Lyndon said, "Russell will trade committees with you if you're agreeable." So I got on Foreign Relations, and Russell Long took my place on Commerce, and that's how I finally arrived!

I was on both of those committees, and I am told that I was the first one to be on both at the same time. I haven't done enough historical research to know whether that's true.

Q: Did you deal with foreign relations affairs on the Appropriations Committee?

MCGEЕ: Oh, yes. Because I was the lowest member of Appropriations, I was the only one that didn't have his own Appropriations subcommittee. So Appropriations Chairman, Carl Haydens, invented a subcommittee called the Subcommittee on Foreign Aid, and I was

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named first its chairman. So that's how, again, by this maneuvering on the part of Lyndon Johnson, that we got as far as we did when we did. And foreign aid became my great vehicle for covering the world, five or six times around the world, because we had foreign aid scattered all over the globe in those days. It was a great breakthrough.

Q: Your experience is really unique, because you come at it first from the Senate point of view when you were on Appropriations. How did you view the effectiveness of our aid program? Were there any major problems you saw with it?

MCGEE: The biggest problem that I saw in it was that it was the task that nobody wanted. In other words, if they were forced against the wall, okay, they would grudgingly say, "I'll go around one more time," meaning give the administration a vote, the Secretary of State a vote on foreign aid. It was a "no win" situation in the political sense, because we had all been isolationists not very far back. The shock of World War II brought us along. President Eisenhower dignified our entrance into the real world. He wasn't aggressive in it, but he had his great reputation from World War II. His prestige did a lot in the 1950's to help focus both political parties on foreign aid and international problems.

I remember a little incident. The only time that I met President Eisenhower personally had to do with a reflection that he was making at the time, that he felt that he was lucky by the coincidence of time, because the Republicans were still running against Franklin Roosevelt after his four terms, but Eisenhower had dignified in his two terms the reality that the world was round. Of course, he had discovered it the hard way, too, I mean, being a general in World War II. But it was his prestige that made it possible for us to get up to the brink of commitment in international questions. That made it an easier bridge to cross.

Q: It really was a remarkable turnaround.

MCGEE: For the U.S., it was a complete turnaround.

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Q: In ten years for a country which was essentially isolationist, small military, to playing the major role in the world.

MC GEE: I sometimes change the word "isolationist" to "isolated," because there were lots of people that were interested internationally, but we were the only big power that was removed from what in the old days was the center of the power of the international political world. The Atlantic and Europe on our Eastern front; and the Pacific and Asia to our West were equidistant, almost, so we had that unique geographical phenomena that "somebody upstairs" had created for us. But nonetheless, Eisenhower capsulized it in a way that was not easy for him. They tried to dignify him by making him president of Columbia University, first capitalizing on his popularity as Commander in chief in the European theater, to give him at least an academic front to move from. But he did it with a strong sense of responsibility, I felt, thanks to a fellow by the name of John Foster Dulles, who was his Secretary of State, to a Foster Dulles' brother Alan Dulles, who became Chief of Central Intelligence, and to a third person, also by the name of Dulles, their sister, Eleanor Dulles, who was a most active and effective internationalist. That was a great triumvirate.

The other factor that had set up some of these contacts for me, I had been a Carnegie Fellow in 1952 at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City. That was more of a breakthrough than I realized. The Carnegie Foundation brought me to New York City for a year and assigned me to the council to research the mysteries of Soviet Intentions. There was a young man there by the name of George Franklin, who is still there. He's now the great patriarch of the Council on Foreign Relations. He and I were of the same generation, we talk much the same language. He taught me a great deal. But fraternizing with those professionals, the Dulleses, the Rockefellers, David Rockefeller ended up being the president of the Council while I was around there. It was a heady experience.

Q: There was a progression of training you into an internationalist, really.

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MCGEE: Yes, it really was. Of course, our Institute of International Affairs at Wyoming that brought in these distinguished people in the first place, reflected my commitment even earlier. But after my Chicago experience, it was professionally deepened by my experiences at the Council in New York City.

During my time at the Council (1952-1953), I met a fellow who was a hustler there. By that I mean he ran errands for us. He had his own little tourist bureau down in New Jersey. Fred Ingvolstad was his name. Unfortunately, he's gone now, but his wife is still alive. Fred ran tours to the various parts of the world, so he set up what was represented as the "first tour" to the Soviet Union by students. A year and a half before (approximately 1951), Time magazine had sent the publisher of Time with a group of 100 businessmen into Russia. That kind of broke the ice. So our academic group was the first group that followed the business leaders, some 23 or 24 people. They specified they had to be teachers. Not just in Wyoming; we had four or five from Wyoming, but wherever they wanted to come from. We had quite a mix from all over the country. We were the first student group into the Soviet Union. So it was sort of a breakthrough. That would have been in the summer of 1956.

My political advisors told me, "Look, you're getting ready to run for the Senate. Whatever you do, for God's sake, don't go to Russia! They'll have you tagged as a commie."

My reply was, "Well, I'm aware of that and I'm ready to pay that price. If that's the consequence, I'd rather go to Russia than to appear to keep the other option of the Senate free of any controversy."

But the way that it turned out, when we returned from Russia, I just couldn't make enough speeches. Every church in the state! I think I appeared in some 70 different churches as a preacher on "religion in Russia" when we got back. Every high school in the state. "Russians are different." Every Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, Lions Club. It was just night and day. For both Lorraine and me. I would speak to the men's groups and on the campuses of

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most of the high schools and all of the colleges. Lorraine addressed most of the women's organizations. We would go out after 4:00 in the afternoon, as far as we could race in our little Plymouth station wagon. Lorraine would always go with me because she'd drive back in the middle of the night while I slept, so I could meet my 9:00 class the next morning. We did that for the entire school year.

My point is that "Russia" was a magic word in those days. We were the first group after Henry Luce's trip over there with the business men just 2 years earlier.

Q: One point on the Appropriations Committee. You said you were in charge of foreign assistance. How was this viewed in the Senate at the time? It's often a controversy, saying, "We're just handing out money to people and there's nothing in it for us." Was there a feeling with anybody, or were you ever trying to sell the idea, "Look, we're all in this world together. There is something in it for us to have other people doing better."

MCCEE: That was obviously the case among the more sophisticated, but in terms of its being a political issue, that was a hot potato, because we were still breaking down some of those earlier barriers. In the Senate, my order from the Appropriations Committee chairman, chairman of the committee for many years, Carl Hayden from Arizona, he personally picked me for it after Lyndon Johnson had a little conference with him. What Hayden said in his announcement was, "This is going to be tough work. Your assignment is to follow Senator Ellender wherever he goes in the world." Ellender, in those days, even though a devout "isolationist", was noted for his travels and adventures all throughout the world.

Q: This is Senator Allen Ellender from Louisiana. I have to say from the Foreign Service point of view, I only caught him once, but he was what is known as a pain in the posterior, because he would travel everywhere and publish long reports of his trip which were basically personal travelogues of no significant interest and almost always anti-foreign.

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MCGEE: Absolutely. You're absolutely right. Let me give you a footnote to that one. He enjoyed the great travels because it was an eye-opener and exciting sort of thing, but it only determined him to pull in and hide, because he wouldn't want to live in that kind of real world. And perhaps he might have abused it a time or two.

Let me give you this illustration. I ultimately became Chairman of the African Subcommittee. We invented it on Foreign Relations because I was the only member of the committee that didn't have his own subcommittee. So Chairman Fulbright created it and put me on as the chairman.

On one of our earliest trips I was called upon to speak in Rhodesia on how we were opening up our horizons in the U.S., and here was the real world, and Rhodesia was on the brink of a civil war at that time. The morning that I arrived there at the airport, a large delegation of the press had gathered. I thought, "Boy, that's really great!" However, they were there in such large numbers because the day before, Alan Ellender had been there. Alan Ellender had delivered to the Assembled press what some of them wanted to hear, namely that, "The way to control the blacks in Africa and everywhere else is to be sure you keep them in their place, and if they get out of order, we have a way of solving that one in Louisiana." And he went on that vein.

Q: You just made the motion of cutting your throat.

MCGEE: Yes. And so that was what I had to follow. He had made his statement the day before my arrival. I went in with this other approach. I was following Alan Ellender around, and I thought, "Wow, this is going to blow the hell out of everything." But what it did, because he had been there and said those things, which had been so extreme, it made me look like a statesman. So my breakthrough was because of him, not in spite of him. He set the stage.

I didn't mean to digress, but that remains an interesting footnote to the earlier African days.

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Q: I think this is very important. On the Foreign Relations Committee, can we talk a bit about Africa? You came on the Foreign Relations Committee in 1962. This was the period that you might call the American discovery of Africa.

MCGEE: It really was.

Q: 1960 was about the time when many of the countries were becoming independent, and we began to look. We're talking about the lower part, what we call now black Africa, below the Sahara.

MCGEE: That's right.

Q: How did you view that Africa at that time?

MCGEE: At that time, I viewed it as exciting, because I'd only been there once before, and that trip was confirmed to North Africa (in 1959), particularly Egypt. I'd been most places in the world, even by that time, but not so much in Africa. From that time on, I covered Africa thoroughly at least three more times in the course of human events. I found it extremely exciting. This was a formative time for them because they had great leaders; they also had threats of civil strife splitting up nations.

I remember that the second first time I arrived there in Africa, in 1961, a fellow by the name of Jack Kennedy had been elected President. He had called me into his office at the White House here and said, "You know, Gale, I just got word from State that you are taking a group of Senators to Africa in December (1961). I wonder, would you mind taking my kid brother along? He needs to discover that the world is round." He was referring to Teddy, of course. So we added Teddy to our delegation.

We concentrated in the north and western parts of Africa on that particular trip in 1959. We got into the interior as far as Nigeria. We did get as far south as what is now Kenya, and then all up across the west side of Africa. We didn't get clear down to the tip. To this day

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I've never been in the Union of South Africa. Always was going to do that the next trip, but each time it was easier to drop it off. But in any case, we covered it all and made, I think, a significant report when we came back.

Q: How did the senators respond to this? Here were developing countries. Was it, "Oh, my God, what a problem"?

MCGEЕ: Most of them were already curious, but not yet enough to get involved. That's how I got involved. That's a key reason why Senator Fulbright invented the committee, because he was trying to give me something to do. Occasionally sparks flew sometimes and we had exchanges, but we respected each other. So this was invented, in the second instance, to keep McGee busy. In other words, "Get him occupied." If I was there, I wouldn't be bothering him quite as much in Latin America or in the Alliance countries of Western Europe.

Q: When you took the senators to Africa, how were the senators responding to the problems of Africa? Were they saying, "This is very nice, but it's not our business"?

MCGEЕ: The groups that we had with us, that we took, had their eyes and ears open. We didn't travel with what you would associate with the character that I was describing earlier and a few like him, because this was still new and exciting.

Q: You might say excitement was . . .

MCGEЕ: These were real people with real possibilities. In Nigeria at that time, it was just before the civil war there.

Q: We're talking about the Biafran civil war.

MCGEЕ: The Biafrans. Right. In the Congo, the Belgians were still there, but they were gradually withdrawing. I remember our first trip, as we got in from the airport to Leopoldville. There was a big parade down main street just as we arrived downtown. We

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were stalled by this parade. The thing that was most dramatic was that there was a big truck with a platform on the back, and on that truck platform, as one of the floats in the parade, they had a fellow by the name of Lumumba chained to the back of the truck, and a chain around his neck, just parading him down Main Street. Of course, they were taking him out to shoot him.

Q: This was Patrice Lumumba, who was the early prime minister.

MCGEE: That's right. In those days, communism was very suspect in Leopoldville, and the communist segment of the government entrenched itself directly across the river in the other little Congo.

Q: This is formerly the French Congo in Brazzaville.

MCGEE: That's right, in Brazzaville. So that was the way we broke the ground there. From that time on, I think I was there either two or three or more times. A couple of times we went from the Pacific into Africa, that is, to vary the transportation route for other reasons. We had important places we could stop along the way. But Africa, after that breakthrough in Nigeria, which was the critical one, the Belgian Congo was second in the context of our sequence of time as travelers, we brought them into the real world. Nigeria went through its bloody civil war in which I was on the side of the Nigerian Government rather than on the side of the eastern Nigerians, whereas in the Senate, Javits and Kennedy were on the side of the Biafrans.

Q: How does this translate when you say "on the side?"

MCGEE: I don't mean in terms of the issue. There were three Nigerias, really. I mean I thought it was better to treat Nigeria as a whole, whereas the idealists were working at the splintering off, so that you would have had still more governments involved.

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Q: I'm looking at this in terms of what a researcher would say looking at this some years from now. How did this translate in the Senate? You felt that it was better to treat Nigeria as a whole, yet there were others who were thinking in terms of splintering. What effect could you or the others have on policy towards this?

MCGEE: The effect that it had on policy was controversy. This created interest, which raised the level of understanding as the spillover from any kind of controversy like that would do. Even though the feelings were strong, let's say, in regard to the Nigerian question, on balance, having gone through that, the whole level of concern and fascination, even stimulation of the emergence of what had always been regarded as a jungle world of illiterate savages, they found out that this was the real world of mankind. I think that was the key result that changed the whole African question around.

Q: The fact that we looked very closely at these, many of them educated people fighting a war, duplicating somewhat the same things that we went through in our history.

MCGEE: That we could identify with. The Ford Foundation was one of the pioneers into that field in Africa, as well as the Rockefeller Foundation. They made it a real priority in their allocations in those years.

Q: Looking at it again from the Senate, on your trips through there and also the testimony and the contacts with the State Department on Africa, did you see serious gaps? Were they well informed? Were they wrong?

MCGEE: I thought the State Department was far enough ahead on that. I wasn't prepared to say that at first, but after I got over there, I found a lot of deep roots. Of course, that would have been a little later on in history, but that they had gone back quite a way. The people that we had from the State Department that identified, that always were with us on each trip as counselor and that sort of thing, were very realistic, it seemed to me. In other

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words, I was impressed with them in all instances. We didn't have any confrontations or breakups.

One of the things that we discovered on that first trip that was unusual, but I reported it nonetheless, was that we had to go slow at first sending black ambassadors to Africa, the reason being that the Africans, those in government, were sophisticated enough to know that blacks were the lowest class in American society in those primitive days. Therefore, the U.S. was sending Africa “second-class citizens” if we sent a black ambassador. That was one of the reports we made in that very first round. I made it orally to the Department, that we had to be sure and pick carefully here. Of course, one of the breakthroughs, we finally had a black ambassador early on to Nigeria, and we had Terry Todman in North Africa, who turned out to be one of our most effective.

Q: A professional Foreign Service officer.

MCGEE: This was several years after we were talking about the Nigerian question.

Q: It's not reserved only for that country. Speaking myself now as a professional diplomat, there's a tendency to send back people of Irish heritage to Ireland, people of Italian heritage to Italy, with the idea that this is flattering to the countries. Actually, often it's not, because in most countries, the people who left a country were usually what were to be termed as dissidents or escaping from the lowest economic rung, who had gone over as —my name being Kennedy, yours being McGee, the potato blight probably got us out. In other words, our families weren't from the upper crust. Often these other countries don't look upon this as being a political plus. They'd rather have somebody who seems to come out of the establishment.

MCGEE: Yes.

Q: Did you feel that the State Department and Foreign Service personnel were going through a learning period, too, about Africa?

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MCGEЕ: Oh, I think they were, but I think that they were also going through a very candid period in which whenever there was a stumble somewhere, they frankly said, "That was a mistake. We shouldn't have done it. Let's do it this way."

I was impressed with the caliber of the people that were assigned to us. Sometimes they assigned us somebody that needed such a trip to widen their horizons.

Q: You're talking about an escort officer who went around.

MCGEЕ: But they always turned out to be first class. I think they got an education also, which was State's motivation on it, plus keeping us out of trouble. I don't think we ever had a mistake in terms of the selection of an escort officer. It was always carefully done. Somebody did it right.

Q: How interested was President Kennedy in Africa?

MCGEЕ: He was very much interested because it was a new horizon. In the first place, he never forgot, in the convention, that it was Wyoming's vote which we got shifted at the last minute. We were for Lyndon Johnson in the Democratic convention in Los Angeles in 1960. But when Kennedy began to build up that volume of votes, when it got down to the point of decision, Wyoming was always last to be called because that's the lowest point in the alphabet. We were at the bottom of the roll call listing. By the time they got down to almost three-fourths of the way, it was clear that there was a tide shifting for Kennedy. When it hit us, the convention needed nine more votes. We had 11 votes to cast. They needed nine votes to put Kennedy over, and I huddled our people real fast and said, "We're going to cast these nine votes and we'll still leave two of them for Stu Symington to show him that we haven't forgotten about him." But we put Kennedy over.

After the Wyoming vote, they announced Kennedy was the nominee. So he never forgot that, likewise. He had been out to my state beforehand. I have all kinds of pictures of

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Kennedy, in which he was spending time in Wyoming. He had an affinity for it, partly because it was a delightful state and it still counted as two Senate votes in foreign policy.

Q: Regarding Africa, was he ever sending you messages such as, "Let's push this," or, "Let's push that"?

MC GEE: Rather the other way. He listened very closely to what we brought back, and that influenced him. The first time it was so primitive, so far removed from our experience, that it was easy. But he always was filled with a second depth of questions afterwards. "How was the trip? Who did you meet this time? Did you notice any changes this trip in comparison to the preceding one?" and these kinds of follow-ups, so he was well informed.

Q: He would do the equivalent of a debriefing of you afterwards?

MC GEE: In the first place, he had gone through a serious briefing, obviously, because he asked the meaningful questions. The Secretary of State in that interval through Kennedy and Johnson, Dean Rusk was the true giant of his time.

Q: Did you find him interested in Africa?

MC GEE: Very much so. He had no choice because he already believed the world was round. (Laughs) We had a few in the Senate who hadn't discovered that as yet.

Q: Were there any serious problems in the Senate that you had to deal with concerning relations with any of the African countries while there, either between the Senate and the President, the Senate and the House, or within the Senate?

MC GEE: The biggest one was the Nigerian civil war, obviously. The other one was the Congo, because that was divided between the communists in Brazzaville and the so-called Belgian loyalists in Leopoldville. That was certainly the one.

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The other one was in Rhodesia, where there was genuine civil war. I have mentioned an incident that occurred there. That was an acute one. Kenya was on the verge of such twice when we were there. They had a hard time resolving that one. What's the little island just off the coast?

Q: Zanzibar.

MCGEE: Yes, Zanzibar. We got into a little flak with the press in Kenya when I insisted that we visit Zanzibar, because it was a divisive issue in the sense that they were a bunch of revolutionaries who wanted to be independent. They didn't want just a statehood relationship in those days. So that was sensitive, and we were criticized for it, but it turned out we lucked out on it in the sense of the tide of events.

The separation of Kenya from the British turned out to be a rather exemplary process, as I recall it, in an orderly way to do it. Rhodesia had a little more difficulty, but it finally came through. They had a bit of a shooting interval there.

Q: How did you become appointed to be ambassador to the OAS? This was in 1977.

MCGEE: I'll tell you how it happened precisely. Number one, Dean Rusk remained not only my constant contact, but confr#re, whenever we got together back in the idealistic days of Kennedy and Johnson. So he instituted it with Jimmy Carter, and carried all the responsibility of it even then. I had met Carter before. I had spoken in Georgia when he was governor, at his invitation, lecturing on foreign policy, so we were already acquainted. But Rusk carried the ball on it and raised this trial balloon to see if I'd be interested. I assured him that I would. That was kind of a natural in many ways because I had some acquaintance with the hemisphere. So there was no objection from President Carter.

As soon as the election results were finalized, I had a call from Carter himself, who called to say that he was considering this, and he was coming up to Washington "to get his feet wet a little bit." This would have been a bit earlier, I think in late November of 1976.

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So I had a meeting with him on that occasion. Soon thereafter, they announced the appointment.

Q: How did President Carter view the Organization of American States at that time, before he came into office?

MCGEE: I'm not sure I could tell you in depth on that. All I can say is that he was a little uncertain about its dimensions or its capabilities, but that he was convinced by his closest counselor at that time in international affairs, who was Rusk, that this was not always meaningful as an organization, but must be, and had a great chance to be, and was irreplaceable in the hemisphere. Rusk was rather strong on that. So it was in that way that I think they approached me, in that context. We decided that that would square with my western hemisphere Subcommittee on Foreign Relations and the Appropriations Committee responsibilities as well, not to mention my academic background in Latin American Affairs.

By that time I had already covered every country in the hemisphere at least twice, doing other things. So I looked forward to it. It was a little disconcerting at first in getting used to it, in the sense that I was directly on the firing line rather than pontificating as a senator, which was quite different. You could go like this, but you had to move a few dominoes around here and there in order to make sure that you didn't create a worse problem. But I had good people with me to assist in keeping American hemisphere policy on the high road.

Q: What sort of support did you get when you got there? Did they tell you how to operate?

MCGEE: I lucked out by having fortunate chiefs of staff. I had three chiefs of staff. Bob White was the first, and he was probably the most brilliant of the three that I had.

Q: Later an ambassador.

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MCGEE: Later an ambassador. In fact, he was quite an ambitious fellow and was ready to move, but he was with me about two years, and certainly was very familiar with Central America, was very helpful and very much respected. He was succeeded by the most active and the most personable of my chiefs, Irving Tragen. Tragen is still at the OAS and handling a lot of their intelligence work.

Q: Concerning narcotics.

MCGEE: That's right. Because of the narcotics traffic.

Then the third chief was Herb Thompson, who also was very good, but he had a shorter stint at it before I was going out. But they were all invaluable to me because they had the contacts within the Department, like the intelligence section or all of the Latin American specialists at the opposite end of the hall from my office, just down the hall, that I could run in on, and did so without appointments. We kept that going, and the reverse was true of the Assistant Secretary for Latin American Affairs from time to time. So it was a good relationship and very helpful to me in terms of education.

I took two of my own staffers with me, because they understood my methods. One was the secretary that I just talked to. The other one was a gal that was a student of mine in Nebraska Wesleyan University way back when McKinley was President. She handled a lot of the legislative work, only because she had been familiar with it in my office in the Senate. So I had those two benchmarks. *(Elizabeth Strannigan, my secretary, and the other was Betty Cooper, a former student.)

Q: You felt, then, you had a solid staff.

MCGEE: I felt that State gave me good people.

Q: State was not trying to shortchange you.

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MCGEE: In other words, they didn't use it as a place to shove somebody. We had one little incident with them, and I'll not mention the names, in which they did obviously stick somebody in there because they couldn't find a place for them, and we rejected it. Because I was advised by one of my three trusted advisors to do so.

Q: This is one reason for having good intelligence and good relations with people within the Service.

MCGEE: That's right, absolutely. They're the only ones that detected it. Don Stewart is another one that was on my staff, and he was extremely skillful. He's still down there.

Q: What were the major problems that you felt faced you when you came on board in early 1977 to the OAS?

MCGEE: It seemed like there were lots of problems, more than I had anticipated. Lots of things became problems. I think one of the significant ones was rationalizing this disproportionate U.S. contribution to the OAS budget, and trying to rationalize it for the other end of the hill in terms of the kind of responsibility it meant for us and the opportunities it created for us.

Q: I think the United States, at least at that time, paid two-thirds.

MCGEE: Two-thirds. And they still do.

Q: Why?

MCGEE: It was adjusted to 60%, I think, finally at one time. They tried that.

Q: Why do we pay that much when you have something like 22 involved?

MCGEE: I think the reason was obvious: to get it off the ground in the beginning, back in the 1950s when it began. It took that to get it going, and it was sold in part, I'm told, back

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in those primitive days right after World War II, as the way that we could more successfully influence policy. There were those that used that argument. We were dominating, anyway, in lots of ways, but it was always abrasive, and that this would provide a chamber for knocking heads together, including ours. This turned out to be a security area, as they reminded us of then, that people had forgotten about since.

In World War II, Hitler sank a greater total of tonnage at the entrance to the Caribbean than in all of the North Atlantic added together. I don't remember that coming out of World War II, because I wasn't paying attention in those days. But that's the fact of life, and that demonstrated how vital it was and still is. Good relations wherever they could be achieved related to the security factor as well—I mean the strategic factor in our location. You couldn't begin to take care of these problems, for example, certainly not by planes or trains coast to coast, because we had the two great ocean basins that were strategically significant in the world, simultaneously.

So that leads me to the second big thing that was there, not only this opportunity, but it was there that we put together the tactics and the strategy on the Panama Canal Treaty. I was in charge of that because of the OAS. I think that was the biggest single thing we did in those days.

Q: Why don't we first talk about the money angle. This raised a tremendous storm of protest at the time. I think President Carter said that the United States should make it more equitable so we wouldn't play such a dominant role, that we should pay 25%.

MCGEE: Yes.

Q: How did you deal with this? What was the reaction?

MCGEE: The way I dealt with it, I got together with Dean Rusk.

Q: Dean Rusk, by that time, was professor at University of Georgia.

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MCGEE: One of the Georgian institutions. He was perhaps the closest confidant to Carter in Carter's pre-period. He had been quite close. I give him the credit for having brought Carter into the modern world. I would think that's not an exaggeration. Of course, we had had good contacts, Rusk and I. So that brought this all together quite naturally, but it wouldn't have happened without Dean Rusk and one other man. They cleared it with a fellow from New York by the name of Cyrus Vance, because they already had him picked. Carter had the biggest hand in picking Cy Vance as Secretary of State.

Cy Vance and I had traveled the world together already before, and got along very well. I met Cy first at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City, back in the primitive days, and that carried forward when he moved to Washington. So he moved quickly on this OAS business once he got in the State Department.

Q: The decision to pay 25%, had you been part of making the decision?

MCGEE: I was a key part in keeping the high proportion. I made no effort to cut it. It became a very controversial thing. Alan Ellender was one of those that was leading the effort to cut it back in the Senate in those dark ages. Way back. He tried to cut it clear back as early as 1956.

Q: I think Carter, in 1977, in addressing the OAS, raised this. But where did the initiative come from for paying the 25%, for cutting it?

MCGEE: That initiative, I think, was the political pressure within the Senate, not within the hemisphere. There was nobody in the hemisphere that resented the dominance that the 2/3 formula tended to give us, because it was nickels and dimes, which always made a difference. (Laughs) They could swallow a lot of pride over that. So it was actually budgeting pressure, particularly in the House and the Senate, but more in the Senate largely because they always thought they had priorities in foreign policy.

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Q: I'm trying to get a feel for how these things work. This was a controversy. You were the ambassador. Were you basically handed a piece of paper saying, "This is what we're going to go for"? Or had you been part of the consultation?

MCGEE: In the first place, I'd been involved with it as a senator. It was already brewing at that time, and I went for it as a senator, the full two-thirds, or sixty percent, whichever was to be decided upon. But secondly, because of the strategic significance in terms of our own security concepts. That wasn't always quickly recognized, because these were penny ante governments that could be bought. Nicaragua was a great case in point. That was the kind of crises we had there.

Q: Carter made a speech in which he called the 25% responding to political pressure. As the ambassador there, did you salute and make the proper noises?

MCGEE: All I remember saying—now, I don't know what the record will show—my recollection on that was, "We ought to go slow on that. I think there is good reason because of how much it means to us that we ought not to play penny ante on this business just for show and tell purposes, that what we're playing with is our own security which is now irrevocably linked coast to coast and by a little ditch that's called the Panama Canal." I had some strong feelings on all that just because I followed it historically. I had done some writing on it, also. So it was real conviction. I guess maybe a little of it was elitism, in the sense that I thought that was a pretty sophisticated policy, that we had come quite a ways in reaching that position. We still had a lot of illiterates and bungleheads that had to be brought into the real world.

Q: How was the issue resolved?

MCGEE: The issue was resolved simply with the help of the ambassador from Mexico, who was the master craftsman in the OAS in those days, Ambassador De La Colina, who still is alive, I think. He's 92 or 93. He was Mexico's ambassador, and I would say he was

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the giant elder statesman in the OAS as a whole, and respected by everybody. He had that magic touch. He had the gift of a sharp mind that kept up with his tongue. Whenever there was an impasse like this, we always turned to him first, the U.S. did. He invariably could do it. And they would wait very often. "Well, what does De La Colina say?" He was deeply respected.

Q: How did this work out? Was there a vote taken? Did we feel we could not make it unilateral?

MCGEE: We didn't bring it to a vote. We convinced our people. Of course, by that time Vance was convinced, too, that we were better off to keep this heavier part of it, because it did guarantee stability in terms of otherwise uncertain aspects hemisphere-wise. Secondly, it was becoming increasingly clear to a lot of other people, thanks to the efforts of international lobbying groups and information groups, how greatly important and enhanced was the Caribbean from our own security point of view in terms of the facts of trade, communication with vast tonnages, and of course our national security. There was no substitute for that.

Q: That issue, then, was resolved internally within the United States administration.

MCGEE: That's right.

Q: Moving to an extremely important issue of President Carter's time was the Panama Canal. Could you describe what the issue was?

MCGEE: The Panama Canal, in terms of an issue, was probably the most important single issue, at least from my perspective, in that whole period because of the sort of grandeur of power, isolationist view, whatever you want to call it. This was ours. We seized it, then we built it, and then it became obvious how strategically important it was. It was the old Teddy Roosevelt approach; he deserves the credit for having set the stage for this. It was

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completed in room 1156 in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. That's where the whole deal was made.

Nonetheless, it was a very substantive thing by this time when you took the tonnage, the changing strategies, because of our new Pacific basin role as a result of World War II, you had the two-ocean concept and the focus that, thanks to Hitler, had placed on it in a realistic sense. So I think that those were the obvious things that made the canal issue so important. And how to keep it open was what we had the toughest time selling. Not how to own it, but how to keep it open.

In other words, it's such a vulnerable several miles there to illegal or illicit trafficking, taking a briefcase with a bomb and planting it in the weeds right alongside the locks, or whatever else. It is mind-boggling to think of absolute security. Our argument was that the best way to keep it secure is to keep it on as broad a base as possible. That's when we took in all of the Central American governments and Torrijos, the dictator of Panama.

We moved the whole question of the canal to Washington, and we had this debate on the canal and its role in our national interests.

Q: This is within the OAS?

MCGEE: Within the OAS, with all the ambassadors there. We had Carter and Cy Vance there, because they were likewise involved. We had this all out around the table. Mexico was willing to shift their position and back us for a reduction, but De La Colina's advice to us was, "You'll have all hell to pay for it if you succeed in reducing the formula." I took that seriously. By that time, Rusk was telling Carter this, that the spinoffs, the waves that would be made if we prevailed in cutting the Canal cost estimates would probably weaken the OAS because of redistributing the burden for those votes. In hindsight, for whatever it was worth, I think that reasoning turned out to be right on target.

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The disproportionate value to us because of all of our stakes is obvious, but it was a psychological one of budget and playing with the numbers—two-thirds of the total of 60% of the total. Once you got around that, World War II, I think, helped us probably on that in the sense of creating an awareness that there were two oceans. So it probably made it easier.

Q: On the Panama Canal decision, were you part of the decision-making apparatus?

MC GEE: I was a key part of it. That was the first official public debate on the Panama Canal in the United States - launched in a public debate at the Mayflower Hotel.

Q: This is the McGee-Dole debate, referring to Senator Robert Dole, on the Panama Canal Treaties on November 29, 1977.

MC GEE: Right. That was sponsored by one of our four major policy groups around the town.

Q: Was there a real method in Carter appointing you to the OAS? Obviously the Panama Canal was a major project. He said, "All right, if I have somebody who comes from the Senate establishment to go back and talk on this and to represent it, it's much better than having an unconnected Foreign Service officer or somebody who can't speak."

MC GEE: I think you're leaving out one step. That was Dean Rusk who did that and pulled it off with Carter, his neighbor in Georgia.

Q: Saying, "You need somebody from the Senate establishment"?

MC GEE: No, he said, "You need Gale McGee."

Q: Not just somebody, but Gale McGee.

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MCGEE: Yes, because I had been defeated for a Senate fourth term in 1976. In other words, I was available. If I'd still been in the Senate, they might not have done it, or I might not have taken it. I probably wouldn't have. With another term in the Senate coming up, I would have gotten great seniority. But given the fact that there I was with the shocks of the campaign of '76, a real shocker among the predictors, this was the best opening that they had in terms of where I would be the most useful. That was Rusk's calculation.

Q: There was a real calculation behind this rather than, "We've got to do something for Gale McGee."

MCGEE: There are many things they could have done. This was the other way around.

Q: "We've got a real cat and dog fight on the Panama Canal. Let's have the right man in the right place for this."

MCGEE: This was the one, even though I had no great language faculty. The issue was the handling of the Senate.

Q: The battle was fought in the Senate on this.

MCGEE: To get the necessary votes in the Senate. But the issues were many. That was the opening debate at the Mayflower [Hotel]. From that day until we passed the Panama issue, passed it into reality, I was sent to 58 major public debates, often times my opponent was a general. The general that popped up the most is still alive, slightly older than I am. I'm trying to think of his name. [Daniel Graham] At any rate, he was a gifted speaker. I met him first at the University of Arkansas, then we debated on a big CBS show in New York, out at the University of California, at the University of Colorado, and even in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Q: He was taking the line that our security . . .

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MCGEE: We can't give it up. This is ours. The audiences, to start with, were a little cool, but they warmed up very rapidly as more and more information came out on this. They got a lot of people into the field, finally, making speeches, but no one got anywhere near my exhaustion.

Q: Why did the Senate vote to support turning the canal essentially over to the sovereignty of Panama? After all, this is giving up something that we built.

MCGEE: Sure.

Q: What do you think?

MCGEE: I think what got them by that time was the reality. The question was, less important, "Who owns it?" If you owned it and it was closed, it wasn't very valuable real estate. How do you keep the canal open? It's our greatest strategic linkage. And they bought that—finally.

Q: The practicalities of this, that we couldn't keep it open without the cooperation of the Panamanians.

MCGEE: Anybody could close the canal with a little care or preparation.

Q: Was this the argument you used?

MCGEE: This was the argument we used. Right. The vulnerability.

Q: Ambassador, where was your greatest difficulty in dealing with the Senate on the Panama Canal Treaty? Were there particular people who were obstacles?

MCGEE: The majority were obstacles to start with, of course, because they thought, "We had paid for it, it's ours, and the rest of them have no particular vested interest in it. They're just trying to grab a piece of our pie."

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Q: You mean the Panamanians?

MCGEE: These are the selfish ones. "We're America first. We did it, and the canal is ours, as Teddy Roosevelt said." They always quote him: "When we saw that it was available, the Senate dawdled and diddled and daddled and procrastinated and delayed, and so I moved and took the canal." That was T.R.'s brag. Of course, he was applauded for it.

Q: Within the Senate, was there an organized opposition that you had to deal with?

MCGEE: Yes, there was an organized opposition and it was the more conservative senators. Dole epitomized that. He was the new youngster in the Senate, but leaning to the right, Bob Dole, senator from Kansas. But he agreed to take that post because the conservative Republicans didn't want to get caught on that in the sense that there would be a lot of flak. They knew that. As a matter of fact, a couple of them whom I'll not name told them that they were going to support the treaty right away. They were telling me that, but said, "Don't break the confidence." And I haven't broken a confidence. But they were two very strong Republicans. So Dole was kind of caught betwixt and between.

When we finished the debate that night, the one that we've alluded to in the Mayflower Hotel, Robert Dole introduced me to a very lovely lady whom I had known before. He didn't know. It turned out to be his wife, Elizabeth Dole. She said, "Just tell Senator McGee what I just told you."

He said, "Why don't you tell him?"

She said, "No, you tell him."

So Dole said, "She just told me, 'Robert, dear, when are you going to wake up? You follow Gale McGee and you'll stay out of trouble.'" This is what she told him right there. We've often laughed about that since.

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In any case, I had first known Elizabeth Dole when she was in the Nixon Administration and had been the staff chief for Virginia Knauer in Consumer Affairs. But it was Elizabeth Dole that was her right and left arm, that managed things for her and understood the politics of the Senate. I told Bob then, "Whenever you get in deep trouble, you want to fall back on your gal, because she understands this body probably as well as anybody that we know in this town. She's very astute and very quick, very sharp."

Q: The real battle, as we said before, was in the Senate on this. In the OAS, did you have a tactic? For example, telling the Latin American representatives, "Cool it on this issue. Keep quiet. Don't say anything, because anything you say might be used again this?"

MCGEE: Yes. We used it for some of the Latins, the ones that were more respected. A few of them were just inclined to pop off, anyway, and they didn't receive a great deal of attention.

For example, the Latin American that was the most helpful to us, as usual, was De La Colina of Mexico, because he was the senior in the OAS among all of the ambassadors in those days, and thus, deeply respected. He had a great sense of history. So even on the issues where he would vote against us, he would give us excellent counsel on how better to do something we were trying to get done.

Q: Did you find that for the most part, the representatives in the OAS understood this was almost an internal battle in the United States and they were advising their governments to stay out and let it play out?

MCGEE: There were some that were playing old-fashioned political games with it because it made good news at home to brow-beat the US. That was a standard thing. Whenever you ran out of something to do or whenever you were in an embarrassing bind, you could raise an issue here, hit the U.S. over the head on some other unrelated thing. It was the best way to soft-pedal your difficulty at home.

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Q: This is not unknown in the United States. (Laughs)

MCGEE: Not unknown at all at that time. I'm sure that's where they all learned it to begin with.

Q: What countries did you find particularly difficult to deal with in the OAS on the Panama Treaty?

MCGEE: On the Panama Treaty, probably one of the more difficult ones at that time was Nicaragua, and to some extent, Salvador. Costa Rica was a great friend. Of course, they're always loyal friends on all the great issues. They sometimes stood alone in that part of the hemisphere.

Of course, the government of Panama was split rather seriously in the sense that they wanted security, and they thought these radicals in Panama that were willing to surrender, just give it away, were anti-national interest. So it was a two-sided thing in that way. But Torrijos turned out to be a rather magical force, and I think he was set that way from the beginning, but he was advised carefully not to rush in too fast, but to edge his way in, so I was told. Anyway, that's the way it went.

The showdown meeting was when we had Torrijos up here at OAS, and he sat down in the Council Chamber, with everybody around the table. He made a very candid statement on not only the canal, but the role of statesmanship that would be required to continue the sense of responsibility in the operating of the canal.

In hindsight, my office and I thought that that began to tilt it significantly, when he himself said that there in the OAS, in that mass meeting where we had of all the observers and the members present.

Q: How about your personal dealings with one of the most intractable groups that I can think of, the canal zoners, the Americans who had jobs and lived in the canal area?

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MCGEE: It's all at the University of Wyoming Library now, but I got a lot of hot letters and other hate mail.

Q: I would imagine you did.

MCGEE: And some of them almost obscene in terms of the brutality of their language. "How can you give this away? We earned it. It's a part of our legacy from history, from the truly great Americans like Teddy Roosevelt." Most of them would hide behind Teddy Roosevelt.

Q: In many ways, they represented part of the whole trouble, didn't they?

MCGEE: Really a part of the trouble. That's right.

Q: As the world changed, they were the wrong type to have down in that area.

MCGEE: That's right. They also found some comfort in the ranks of what we used to call in the old days the "America firsters," because they were the isolationists, even as World War I came on. They were from that group mostly. There were a few of them that were dedicated and sincere devotees of the Caribbean area, but who had come up through the processes of change here, and still were wanting to just bounce the Americans out.

Q: How about your dealings with the U.S. military during this time?

MCGEE: We dealt with them. As a matter of fact, the fellow that I debated more places in the 58 appearances that I made on the canal, it almost always was a debate rather than a speech. In other words, I would have, let's say, the local commander of the VFW or the American Legion would be the debater. But the one that was the most constant was a very distinguished general, Daniel Graham. Graham debated me in many significant places and another debate here in town after the Dole debate. He took me on here in town, speaking for the military.

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Q: He was retired at the time?

MCGEE: He was retired. Then he followed me. We scheduled a debate in Massachusetts. He went up there and made a couple of speeches first, and then we were going to debate at Boston College. We had a blizzard down here, and so I was stranded in Washington; he was up there, so the Department of State set up a telephone communication. We debated by telephone for over an hour in order to keep from disappointing the audience up there. Then he debated me out in Fulbright's hometown in Arkansas. Then he followed me to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where he debated me in my territory. Then at Berkeley and at three or four other places scattered around, one in Montana at the university. I must say, he was a gifted speaker. Again, we had our lines drawn. I don't know whether he's died recently, but until about two years ago, he was still around town and in one of these active organizations, international organizations. I'm not sure which one it is, but he's still active in it. So we had a good laugh about the great old days.

Q: On the Panama Canal debate, you played quite a different role from a traditional ambassador. Rather than a behind-the-scenes working with other people, you were really the President's man with the Senate and with the American public on this.

There were two other major issues. One was the Somoza crisis in Nicaragua, and the other was human rights. Why don't we take the Nicaraguan one first. When you came on board, what was the situation in Nicaragua and how was the OAS involved in it?

MCGEE: The situation in Nicaragua, basically in those days was that this was an internal American commitment with the Somozas. It had gone way back. Thus, we were kind of buddies. It was a kind of buddy arrangement. This was our embarrassment, to be sure, the way it emerged in Nicaragua. But nonetheless, we had looked with favor on his accession to the top there. Of course, this went back for quite a number of years.

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Then by the time I was around the OAS, the embers of discontent and even revolution were beginning to glow. So we were coming to the point where we had either to put up or shut up. After some consultation with the Carter people and with great help from Cy Vance, and with the guidance of Dean Rusk from the outside in, we agreed that if we were going to save the canal, in other words, if we were interested in keeping it open, that required certain risks and sacrifices that “who owns it?” would gloss over, because who owns it, you could still keep it open by some arrangement.

Q: Was the canal related to the Nicaraguan situation?

MC GEE: The Nicaragua thing, because this was beginning to sharpen all these edges because of Nicaragua's geography. For example, in regard to the transit of the canal, this tended, in my view in those days, to accentuate the timing of the Somoza thing in terms of whether we had to make a choice of priorities here for the time being, to avoid jeopardizing. It was so interwoven with the Panama issue that it complicated what to do about Somoza.

Q: Could you explain how we saw Somoza? We're talking about 1977. He eventually fell in '79. When you came on board, how did we view the regime?

MC GEE: We viewed Nicaragua as being one of those areas that was, in the first place, geographically located in a significant situation. Thus, the longer we could keep the politics inside the country quiet, the better it was for the canal. In other words, this was one of the “stability areas” along the canal. Then when the riots began in Nicaragua, when the protests, however feeble at the very beginning, we had a mounting nervousness, not “What are we going to do?” because we continued to think that what we were going to do would have to be to stick by Somoza, stick by the Nicaraguans and let them clean up their own house. But it reached the point there where obviously it was going to explode. Then that was a complication that we thought was worth trying to circumvent, if possible.

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Q: What was the specific role that the United States' delegation to the OAS played in the Somoza crisis which went from 1977 until the fall of 1979?

MCCEE: My recollection is that we started out by accepting the inevitability of Nicaragua and Somoza because of the importance we attached to the canal, and that if there was any major convulsion there, it might acquire dimensions that could close the canal, blow it up, whatever, as I took over the OAS. But things were beginning to move very rapidly, particularly there, and not too long thereafter, in Salvador. Of course, a war was already going on between Salvador and Honduras. That was a long technical conflict, but it surrounded the canal. That was our first priority, but it became obvious, because of the violence inside Nicaragua, that this was far more serious than we had anticipated.

We made a basic decision through State that we'd have to find some way to move Somoza out of the picture. We always made jokes about how the easiest way was to send somebody down there with a rifle and make all this kind of junky stuff, but that was just for the cloakroom whispers.

In any case, it might have been early 1978, I just don't remember the years right now. You'll remember better from your records that you have. We made a basic decision to try to get the OAS institutionally to censure Somoza, and we'd been encouraged by some of these very small [countries] like Costa Rica. I think by that time—maybe I've forgotten the years now—Grenada was quite new. One of the little tiny countries on the northern coast there near Venezuela. At any rate, we had some help there for behind-the-scenes working. We decided that the time might be coming rather sooner than later, where we could mobilize OAS sentiment.

When it was tested—I think it would have been 1978, but I'd have to look it up to be precise—where we decided that it was time to call the Nicaraguan cards in. Once more, the ambassador from Mexico was a tremendous help to us on this one, just tremendous, twisting arms and cracking them just a little bit, particularly in Nicaragua, next door to

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them, and getting Salvador and Honduras on the same side in this sort of thing, which was not easy.

The upshot of it was that when we had that showdown afternoon, along in August, I think, late summer at any rate, we'd been hassling and wrestling over it, we called in the vote to take a chance. We really thought that we'd probably have to have another vote later on.

Q: You weren't really sure about the censure.

MCGEE: We weren't sure, but we had to make a decision in terms of timing, and we decided it was worth the risk because we'd have a fall-back line to try another one at that moment, at least, before everything else blew up. So we tried it and it worked the first time. I think it was in August. In any case, we encouraged the petition. There were several of the smaller governments that also put it together, but we encouraged it, and we would try to follow through on it. We sat around that big table there, and when they called roll, there were enough votes that shifted over, particularly in the small Caribbean states that didn't want to take any decision at all, to do it, and pulled it off. It might even have been that first week in September, but very late in that part of the summer. They ousted him—I mean, they voted him out in that context.

Q: The OAS.

MCGEE: The OAS as an organization voted him out. I am told that a couple of our people encouraged him, to say that he ought to look for a haven, and we'd try to be helpful and get him out. I don't know whose brilliance it was to arrange with [Alfredo] Stroessner to find a nice, quiet spot for him, but Paraguay took him in. Of course, I accused my fellow who was down in Paraguay as ambassador soon thereafter, they had that all set. They had a cannon ready. (Laughs) But anyway, they disposed of him not too long after he was down there.

Q: On the timing here, Somoza left, I think, in 1979.

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MCGEE: That's correct.

Q: Somoza falls in July of '79, and he went to Paraguay. Shortly thereafter he was killed. Somebody hit his car with a rocket.

MCGEE: Yes. That's why I said I'm not sure who was lining up that as we encouraged him to go down there. I'm sure we didn't. All I was saying is that this followed very quickly. Stroessner was the best climate.

Q: But during this time, as we were dealing and wrestling with the Somoza business and trying to back away, when the other Latin American states were coming to you, were they divided as far as how they looked at the situation?

MCGEE: They weren't divided in terms of what we were doing. The difference between some of them was that some of them were publicly demonstrating that they wanted us to go ahead, but others were saying, "If you just do it, we'll back you quietly."

Q: This is often the case, I think.

MCGEE: That's right.

Q: Many countries want us to do something. It's nice to condemn us publicly and all.

MCGEE: If it didn't work, they could say they didn't know anything about it, you see.

Q: But at the same time, they know what should be done and they expect us to do it.

MCGEE: Yes. And if it worked, then they would say, "That was great! We're with you all the way."

Q: I was asked to ask you about the role of Zbigniew Brzezinski in dealing with Somoza. Somebody in the Foreign Service said he didn't play a very helpful role and put you up

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to calling for a vote where you were defeated 21 to 1. Do you remember what that was? Something about an international police force.

MCGEE: Yes. We had a strained interval there for a little while with Brzezinski.

Q: He was national security advisor to President Carter.

MCGEE: Right. Not only that, but he knew more than almost anybody else. At least he admitted that! In other words, he was abrasive that way, but he did know a great deal, and he had a lot of that to back up a decision that he made. But he also liked to talk about it or brag about it. That was the difference between Brzezinski and Rusk, in terms of handling diplomacy. They had two different spots they were in, but nonetheless, the difference in the way they handled themselves. Zbig would run out of patience much sooner, or would rush in deliberately much more quickly. At any rate, he was often a problem because he was trying to be "Henry Kissinger". That seemed to be a great obsession in his life. He wanted to be another Henry Kissinger, and he wasn't quite that much put together. That's just my personal judgment in hindsight.

Q: Fair enough. Did the National Security Council, under Mr. Brzezinski, have a policy or a thrust that was essentially different from the way you saw approaching it?

MCGEE: I'm not sure it was the whole National Security Council. We often felt that it was Zbig in the image of Henry Kissinger. A little more impetuous, a little more confident. This was another Kissinger, I mean. Kissinger was a unique person in his own right and stands alone to this day in terms of comparative individuals in that role. I suspect that that was Zbig's dream and frustration.

Q: So often the American political process seems to fall down when it has to deal with Latin America because there really never has been much interest in it.

MCGEE: That's a historical fact of life, yes.

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Q: From the present side and all accounts, it's been a dismal failure of the Reagan Administration in dealing with Nicaragua over the last eight years. But much of it is because there doesn't seem to be much real knowledge. There's a lot of ideology, but not solid knowledge. Is this still true?

MCGEE: I think it's still true to some degree, the reason being that our whole history was Europe. World War II was Japan and Europe. But that's been the flow, our history related to the Western European community, and we were totally interlaced. The Monroe Doctrine was produced by that sort of thing, although I did a special monograph on the Monroe Doctrine that I think turned out to be a substantive contribution to the interpretation of the doctrine. The conclusion was that John Quincy Adams had negotiated with Lord Castlereagh (the British), and the British and the U.S. were to be equals in the declaration (the Monroe Doctrine). That was why we were so courageous about it. At the last minute, Castlereagh and the British government came unraveled a bit, and they backed out. So Quincy Adams was left being the only person, as it were, rather than a joint statement. Then that explains why for so long we never heard a word about a Monroe Doctrine historically, because it just became stuck on record there. They'd gone that far, and then the British dropped their end of it.

Q: We had nothing with which to enforce it anyway.

MCGEE: No. There was nothing that we could wave the flag about or shake our fists over and live up to it. Fortunately, it wasn't really ever invoked until much later on in history, as we know, and then it was out of ignorance of the history of it. It became a convenient phrase. Teddy Roosevelt, of course, glorified it.

Q: In the upper level of the ranks of the State Department or the NSC, was there much attention focused on Latin America, except for when the President was concerned about the Panama Canal? Or did your feel interest was elsewhere?

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MCGEE: Obviously the interest was elsewhere, but I think it was emerging after World War II, from there on, in our internationalism, which Eisenhower, in my view, though he wasn't the greatest of our Presidents, he did lend authenticity or acceptability to this changing posture of the United States. He gave it dignity. The Democrats had been somewhat equivocal, even under Harry Truman, though they came close to it, Truman distinguished himself, in my view, as a President, to everybody's surprise because he was finally Roosevelt's desperation person just to fill the ticket, and when he was there, after Roosevelt departed, that was the big surprise. Harry Truman was bigger than the Democrat from Missouri. So you had had this testing period, but it was still controversial because it was HST. In history, he still ranks as one of our few "near-greats."

Eisenhower, in my interpretation of that near-decade, was responsible for bringing all the loose ends together and making them dignified, again thanks to the Dulleses. I have mentioned them already. They had this deep concept, and Eisenhower bought it or was told to buy it, because he usually wasn't that aggressive.

Q: The focus on Latin American always has seemed to be to focus on whatever happens to be the problem, rather than looking at Latin American as a whole. Did you have this feeling when you were at OAS?

MCGEE: Yes. I mean, we always felt that we started from behind wherever it was, that this was secondary or even tertiary, particularly in the wake of World War II, where even though one might have expected it to sweep up the whole hemispheric concept along with it, it tended to be separated into the Pacific basin and the North Atlantic basin, rather than the south, in my judgment.

Q: Carter was often focused elsewhere, too, wasn't he?

MCGEE: Oh, yes. Sure. And that's understandable. Of course, the only experience he'd really had was as governor. In the international sense, if he hadn't believed in and had his

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right and left arm living nearby down there, Dean Rusk, I think he would have had even more trouble.

Carter, when I talked to him three or four years ago, we were having an informal chat. He told me that he should have moved more expeditiously on international questions than he felt he did. He thought he could have moved a little better, a little more quickly. But he did have Rusk always to fall back on. That was sort of his father confessor, which was his basic steadying force.

Q: What role did Secretary of State Cyrus Vance play while you were with the OAS?

MCGEE: His role was a strong one. By that I mean he not only knew what the score was and knew what had to be done, but was aware of these valleys and peaks, the ups and downs in what had led us up to that time, not only with the Eisenhower years, but with the Democratic years, and Nixon with his difficulty. Because Cy Vance had a sense of history—and still does, in my judgment—and because Dean Rusk was the father of a lot of history of that time, I think those were the steadying balance wheels in that context.

Q: As it pertained to the role of the United States representative to the Organization of American States, did Vance more or less say, "This is your baby. You go ahead. You know what our policy is. Go ahead with it"? Or were you getting other explicit instructions?

MCGEE: Until it came time for the OAS annual meeting, we were given a lot of leeway, but we orchestrated that leeway through the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs.

Q: Who was it at that time?

MCGEE: We had a couple of them. Pete Vaky was the foremost. Anyway, they were good ones.

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Q: Vaky.

MCGEE: Pete Vaky was one, and we had another one that was fairly steady. They were very useful in steadying it before it went to the White House.

Q: *Did they feel that the OAS was an important . . .*

MCGEE: I'm not sure they did when it started, but I think they did as it moved along because it got more and more involved in the Central American area or the Caribbean, in general. I think because of that, it acquired, by force of having to make some decisions, more attention than probably they would have given it in terms of their earlier convictions or what their expectations were in being in that post. I think the times had a great deal to do with that. But it came at a good time in that sense, and it certainly was very helpful to be at the end of the line there, at the ambassador's office, to begin to get some responses like that. It could have been extremely embarrassing. But it was all timed pretty well, and I give Carter, through Vance and always Rusk, because I don't think Dean was ever very far away in those days, I think he always had an input. So to that extent, that's where I come out.

Q: *I'd like to bring up the third last theme that I think was particularly important during the Carter years, especially in Latin American, and that's human rights. Was this sort of a new departure, the idea of the United States going to take both an active and a public role in pointing a finger and promoting what we called human rights, or making sure that people were not tortured and imprisoned and unjustly treated by other countries?*

MCGEE: No, that was a very real one. Of course, the reason it was selected out was that we had already been through the P#ron interval of history in Argentina, as a case in point, which turned out to be a rather dramatic and, I guess you'd say, effective education to the total dominance from the top down, rather than from the bottom up.

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In Brazil, Bill Maullard and I were sent down there to make a quick investigation because of the Carter linkage. Bill had been in the House and had been ambassador to the OAS, and I was the new ambassador. We were picked as a team to go to the northeast of Brazil and work down to Brasilia after we had gone through two or three of the larger population states along the eastern band of Brazil.

Q: This was at a time when Brazil was under military rule.

MC GEE: That's correct. They had been used to military rule and it was very convenient, very quiet mostly. For example, he and I experienced an incident in Recife, where we started. The experience was that we had a dinner given us by the ranking officer in our foreign station.

Q: Probably the consul general there.

MC GEE: Consul general, whatever it was. He turned out to be an erratic source, and we gave him a very bad report card when we got home. I'm trying to think of what made that thing explode. It's a curious incident because it centers in Recife. It was when the government of Brazil was still shooting a few people, but they had had an election. I'd have to look up in my notes who was the chief by that time. This would have been probably just the first year that I was in the ambassador role.

They had a big dinner there, the ambassador did, with a lot of the big stately people, and Bill and I had told him when we came into town, "Look, we don't want any dinners. We're here to work. We want to get out where the drought is, where the problem is. That's why we're here. We don't want these affairs of state on this occasion." Well, the fellow went ahead and held the big dinner, and we didn't show up. We refused to go. It produced a rash of cables to Washington, what we had done to him down there and how embarrassing it was. But State backed us up on that. We filled them in on exactly what the situation had been. They had tried to call our bluff. Meanwhile, we made a strong report in

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favor of help to this less populous part of Brazil, because that's where the big drought was. It, likewise, was a part of the balance of what happened down in Rio. So it turned out all right, but it looked kind of hazy at first.

There was a little footnote on that trip, just for footnote purposes. It has no other relevance. We came down the Amazon from about halfway up, above where the Black River flows into it. It suddenly turns very black. We were above there, up at Manaus. We came down the Amazon by boat for many miles, to the point where you pass from the clear water into the black water, the dirty-looking water, where we put ashore at a place many miles below Manaus, where they said, "We can get you into where all the primitives are and you can see how poorly developed Brazil is. Here you just can't get there from here." They arranged all of that and set it up.

We got over there and got out of a launch into a birch bark canoe, but it was just a hollowed-out log. They got us up in there probably 15, 20 miles inland. It was an all-day trip, at any rate, poling. This is about as remote as you'll see it. They said, "Let's stop and we'll show you. Here's a little grass hut, and you can see there are two people, three people working around there. Let's get out and see what we can learn there."

We got out there. What we saw, they said, "Do you want to look inside this hut?" Inside of the hut on the wall was a picture of Danny Inouye from the Sunday supplement of one of the Chicago newspapers pinned on the wall. One of the couples that lived in this little establishment were Japanese, and so they had that picture there. Then they had a Christmas tree in back of the hut with the lights on!

Q: Inouye's Japanese American who is a senator from Hawaii.

MCGEE: Sure. They were moving heavily into that part of Brazil in those days, but this was a remote area. Danny's familiar with this. He said, "Well, it still makes it remote if I'm

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involved.” But it's a true story, and it was one of those things that shows, of course, that there is no place to hide anymore, however remote!

Q: In the Carter Administration and you, in your role as ambassador to the OAS, how did raising the subject of human rights play in the OAS? At that time, the majority of the OAS consisted of countries that were under military rule of one form or another, some rather repressive, particularly down in the southern cone. That was Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay.

MCGEE: Still there. (Laughs)

Q: How did this play in the OAS?

MCGEE: It started slowly. In other words, generally the understanding was, “You keep your hands off Argentina and Chile.” But the smaller governments, even if it didn't have much prospect of improving much, these were expendable. They could take the rocking without making the big waves for what they looked upon as the stability anchors—Chile, on the one side, and Argentina on the other, even with Pinochet and P#ron.

Q: At that point we felt that both Argentina and Chile, their role for being stable, for whatever reason, was more important than what kind of government they had.

MCGEE: Yes. I think a lot of the Latins did. I'll give you another actual incident that occurred. About the second February that I was at the OAS, maybe 1978, CBS did a show of the worst dictators in the world. They didn't use the word “worst”; it was the equivalent of “worst” in a more sophisticated form. So they showed on a two-hour TV program the background and the consequences of these “worst” guys. It started with Idi Amin in East Africa, Uganda. Then it jumped to Marcos in the Philippines. Then finally it went to Pinochet in Chile.

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The next morning, several OAS ambassadors, one of them from Central America, two of them from Caribbean states, altogether three of them came into my office at State and said, "What are you going to do about that CBS movie last night? Did you see it?"

I said, "Yeah, I saw it. It was really very interesting."

"What are you going to do about it?"

I said, "What do you mean, what are we going to do about it? We're not going to do anything about it. It's an interesting cross-section of different parts of the world."

"They had no business putting Pinochet in with those cut-throats. He's in a completely different world." And these Latin were truly mad as hell.

We said, "Well, the effect is still the same."

"No way! No way! You ought to protest to CBS for lack of a sense of history." That's the way one of them dignified it. They were mad because this was one of "theirs," you see. That says something in terms of this hemispheric mutual identity and co-op approach.

Q: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but did you feel that there were times when you were the ambassador from one of the 20-odd states at the OAS, but often it was them versus you?

MC GEE: Versus us. Sure! Particularly when it was a big sweeping thing like that CBS show. That's something we could do something about, and we had no business allowing that to happen. In other words, you could screen this stuff. You could tell them that's out of order. But they were sensitive because this was one of them. Of course, Pinochet's still there (1987).

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Q: What were you, in your capacity as ambassador to the OAS, doing about human rights within Latin American?

MCGEE: In the first place, we were encouraging it, but we had an uneven policy in the sense that it was a different policy toward Costa Rica, for obvious reasons. But we used that as a benchmark in order to call in some ideas about its neighbors. A little later on, I thought it was a serious mistake, for example, when we mined the harbor in Nicaragua, but I thought that sounded like something one of the generals might have done, instead of one of the admirals.

Q: We're speaking about in the Reagan Administration.

MCGEE: That's right, very early on.

Q: There was a clandestine mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

MCGEE: And it backfired.

Q: It came out of the NSC.

MCGEE: Yes. That's what it was.

Q: We were damned internationally.

MCGEE: Right.

Q: As the ambassador to the OAS, were you constantly hammering away at some of the countries for human rights breaches? Did you talk to the Argentinians and Paraguayan and Chilean ambassadors?

MCGEE: We did to all of them. Of course, Chile had been smart enough to send a temptress up here as their ambassador, Maria S_____ from Chile. She was a charming

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gal and smart. Chile could have obliterated half the population of Chile, and she could have still sold it as a humanitarian exercise. She was very effective. Therefore, Chile was put a little further back than the P#ron government managed, because even with Eva, it began to sink in a little faster than Chile did. Of course, that's automatic because more flows this way than over the ridge of mountains down the other side, at that time in history at least. P#ron was a real factor, and a dramatic one, particularly because of his wife, etc., in those days.

Ellsworth Bunker was down there the second time I was in Argentina. He was our ambassador there. I always thought he had a pretty even keel on all these things, a real gifted diplomat.

Q: This is going way back. But we're talking about the Carter time now.

MCGEE: I keep thinking about the whole picture here.

Q: Let's concentrate on your role as ambassador to OAS. We had a President, Jimmy Carter, who came in and really instituted a policy which has remained, and probably never will go away, and that is respect for human rights.

MCGEE: Right.

Q: Which was very controversial then and still is, but it has become part of the diplomatic landscape in the world today. I give him full credit for that. As the initial person to bring up this very unwelcome subject in Latin American for the first time, I mean, with real attention, how did you handle this?

MCGEE: I have to think a little bit, because I've been overlapping here. I think about everything that was going on.

Q: Let's talk about 1977 to 1981.

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MCGEE: Yes, whenever it was we had the takeover there. I think that human rights-wise, we found a crutch in Brazil, strangely enough, at this time. This was when I was at the State Department. It was a little bit of a surprise that we took credit for it, partly because of one of the pioneering trips we had made earlier on, where we did not rock any boats down there. We listened. Who would the president have been in Brasilia in those days?

At any rate, we felt that we'd had impact because we'd been up the river. Where are those 13 waterfalls just before you cross over into Paraguay in Brazil? We'd had a meeting up there with a group of parliamentarians from Brazil, because they had nice quarters where you could stay and look at the falls. Iguassu Falls, is where it was. We had a meeting with parliamentarians, and that was very useful in the sense that we interchanged as equals in a parliamentary government situation, even though Brazil was still coming out from under some of their old authoritarian areas. It was uneven as between the States, but when you got down near Rio, and even by the new capital, Brasilia, there were evidences of this. But the further you got into the interior, the less you saw of it, and you saw some of the old domineering political personalities.

So I guess we'd say that we thought that was favorable, in that they were nicking away at this in Brazil. We thought it was more dramatic in Argentina only because it was more visible once Peron had finally lost most of the control. The last time we were there, of course, the present President was there in Argentina. We thought that they had made reasonably great strides outside of Buenos Aires.

Q: So you saw progress.

MCGEE: A difference.

Q: So you weren't up against intractable people saying, "We have no problem in our country," and all that?

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MCGEE: Only Stroessner. There was nothing to see or to change there. That was it—fixed. We gave him at that time maybe six or eight more years. (Laughs) And here he is, a generation later, still going (now Stroessner is out). And we thought the same thing would happen to our friend in Chile, Pinochet.

Q: Who also is still going, although it looks like he may be eased from the scene.

MCGEE: Of course, they've made some adjustments in Chile, too, more so than in Paraguay, as I understand it now. It's been a few years since I was last there. Look who's president in Bolivia, up in high altitude—President Paz! President Paz was the first president that they had, and I saw him. Now, after several years, he's back as president again.

Q: As far as human rights go, during the time you were there, things were moving in a positive way?

MCGEE: Yes. Very uneven, but positive on balance.

Q: How did the other ambassadors deal with you? Did they sort of sigh when you came in with complaints or pointing the finger?

MCGEE: We tried to avoid that. We usually tried to work through somebody, and almost always it was De La Colina from Mexico. Even if it was decided we should do it, we never did it until he agreed that that would be better if we did it than if we picked somebody else. He was a very strong reed that we leaned on.

Q: You were trying to make some effect, rather than to indulge in a public relations?

MCGEE: Rather than get an image credit of some sort. We were trying to achieve new breakthroughs.

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Q: The pressure on you was not to posture, but to try to get something done.

MCGEES: But at least they let us get by with it. We didn't get bounced out. There was a division in the State Department on it, and Cy Vance took quite a little flak there at one time in some of that. But he would take it successfully.

Q: How about Brzezinski? Did he have much interest in human rights in Latin American?

MCGEES: I don't recall that he did. I recall that back here in Washington he was always very friendly, would invite himself over and say, "What did you learn on your trip?" or, "How does it look? What's going on in Europe right now?" We'd have an exchange, because he was right upstairs, right overhead above the International Club, of which I was on the board in those days. So we sometimes got together. So we kept in touch in that way.

Q: Sometimes there's someone saying, "Let's bring Canada into the OAS." Does this make any sense?

MCGEES: Oh, we worked hard on that. We really worked hard on it.

Q: Does it make any sense, though?

MCGEES: The Canadians said, "You show us how it would make sense, and we might consider it." In other words, they always kept us on the defensive on that one.

Q: Why were we trying to get Canada in?

MCGEES: We felt it was the only missing link in the hemisphere, and that in the mechanism, as well as in the budget, on the basis of the formula for arriving at the budget, it would be an enriching or a strengthening of the organization. The Canadian answer was always the same: "We keep thinking about it, but we are not ready." But what it really meant was they got all the benefits from the OAS without the dollar commitment, because they were an observer, they were always present at all the debates, and they were the

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most useful, very often, for carrying water for us quietly. So they were extremely helpful in that regard.

Of course, the sensitivity of the elections in Canada always interposed problems at the time those had come due, but nonetheless, there was an honest difference among us. I was right in the middle on that. I would have favored it. I wished that they had come in, but nonetheless, it wasn't that serious if they didn't because they were so cooperative. They were there all the time and they were working for us behind the scenes. So that's a tough nut to crack in many ways, I guess you'd say, because you still got the best of it. I still think that it would be better to have her in where it would be open, but there's no serious penalty for her not being in except for the money factor, which may be their bottom line consideration.

Q: Looking back on your time in the OAS, what did you feel was your best contribution to it? Any particular field?

MCGEE: Not any particular one issue. I think our best contribution was told, likewise, by Dean Rusk at a later time, that we seem to have brought our relationship onto a closer basis of inter-relationships than it had usually enjoyed. In other words, it made a difference. We spent a lot of time, even with the tiniest of the republics, or with the big guys. We spent a lot of time doing that.

This just popped into my mind. We had one little embarrassing thing that you will get a little chuckle out of, if worth nothing else. One of the things we did was to go to the various bits of entertainment around our capital city Washington, and usually with one of the other ambassadors, and it would rotate around. So we had set up an evening that we were looking forward to with a show going on at the old National Theater. It was kind of a racy show. It was like a bunch of naked ladies.

Q: Was it like "O Calcutta!" or something like that?

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MCGEE: It was like “O Calcutta!” At any rate, I set up a reservation and put in my request upstairs to the Secretary of State's office for the four of us to go to the National Theater. They deliberated on it, and pretty soon it came back and said, “We can't approve your having a limousine for that occasion. Not for that show.” They had censured it. We were big enough boys and girls to see it, whatever it was. But we were taking the ambassador and his wife from a little island in the southern Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago. We were taking the ambassador and his wife to that. But State vetoed it.

Q: And you couldn't take the limousine because it wasn't the right kind of show.

MCGEE: Wasn't the right kind of show. That's a true story. I don't know who made the decision, but that was something else. It just popped in my mind.

Q: One of the questions we ask on these interviews, having dealt with the professional men and women of the Foreign Service, how do you evaluate them over the time both in the Senate and as ambassador?

MCGEE: I was prejudiced, I guess, because I had very strong relations with the professionals—very strong. I can only think of one that I encountered anywhere in those years, or even in the Senate days that I felt was one of these guys, someone who was less than helpful.

Q: You're giving your equivocal hand gesture.

MCGEE: The type that was less helpful. He would try to talk around it or out of it. Only one, and he wasn't very high up, but he was a constant one. You might have said he overlapped hemisphere and intelligence activities. But he was a professional equivocator.

Q: But as a whole?

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MCGEE: As a group, I just put it A-1, really. My experience was a terrifically positive one, partly because of some of the personalities from the hemisphere, but almost entirely because of the people that they had us with. In other words, how they staffed me beyond my own staff that I brought with me, the three people. They were very strong.

Q: From the names you've mentioned, you certainly had as strong a team as I can think of.

MCGEE: Well, they were very good.

Q: Would you recommend a young person to go into the Foreign Service today?

MCGEE: Oh, I wouldn't hesitate. I sure would. I'd recommend it. I would encourage them. Not only that, I think it has to be even stronger than it may once have been, although there was an easier tradition to have when the world was more simple. You just had our allies in Europe and over here. I mean, that was the whole focus. The rest of it was sort of what was left over, and you'd sprinkle them out there. But after two world wars and the explosion of mankind in these last 20 years or so, I think it's very rewarding and very reassuring.

Our present ambassador there, Dick McCormack, I continued to serve on his board. He's a hard worker there at the OAS. He's a very hard worker, but he's kind of a loner. Maybe that's what they've made out of it for him, in other words. I get the feeling that he hasn't spread around that much, but it may have been that he didn't feel comfortable perhaps with the Hill. But he's got good staff.

Russ W_____, I think, is exceptionally strong as chief up there, and he's worked hard at it and he's managed some of the language things a little bit, which is better than most of us did. In fact, I think we had only one ambassador in the history of the OAS that really handled the language. Well, two of them. Ambassador Story [deLesseps Story Morrison] finally, way back in the fifties, got along pretty well in it. Then, of course, we had the man

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over at Meridian House, John Jova, was a natural, you see. That's almost cheating! It just ran out his ears. He was great!

Q: As ambassador to Mexico, too. He's one of the real professionals.

I would like to take a tremendous leap back to something that, because of time, I left out. I'd like to ask you to go back and talk about when you were in the Senate, again on the subject of foreign relations. Could you talk about how you viewed the Vietnam War? I'm really talking about the presentation that the State Department made, particularly then, for you on the Foreign Relations Committee, and also your relations with Senator Fulbright on this. This is a major part of history.

MC GEE: I've just been going through the Vietnam stuff in the Congressional Record, just trying to get it sorted out or make some sense out of it somewhere so it's a little fresher than some.

In the first place, I was sent to Vietnam in the company of the senator from Tennessee, Gore. Not this Gore, but his father. We were sent in 1959 by the President on a personal private mission, to report to him only. We were sent around the world, heading this way into Africa as an early stop, then into the Middle East, then to the South Pacific, all the intervening spaces, and back home. The point of it was that it was a sort of exploratory mission, I guess you'd say, taking the pulse of the commitments that would be confronting us down the road ahead.

Al Gore and I were deeply impressed in that we thought we were looking ahead somewhat from India on east. We were going from this way east in our travels. We had been encouraged a little bit by Nasser in Egypt on the way. We made a stop with Nasser. We felt very encouraged, and we carried that over to Tel Aviv directly. They started some talks, but they blew up. They didn't get very far. But we were more impressed with the

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chance we thought for continuity, I guess you'd say, rather than change, in India. Because at that time on that trip, we met Nehru. This would have been in '59.

Q: The father of Indira.

MCGEES: Yes, the father of Indira. And likewise, we did meet one of the founders, I guess, in Pakistan on that trip. This shows you how primitive this was, way back in the beginning.

I do remember something that Nehru said that always stayed with me. He said, "You know, we often wonder how we're going to solve each other's problems. It's easier to solve somebody else's than they are our own." But he said, "Here in our country, we have many Indias, and we sometimes feel kind of helpless. We don't want to give up any of them. We feel an obligation. You know, one lesson I've learned is that I really had more solutions when I was at the university. I think that's the lesson that ought to be taught to all of the generations coming on, that my solutions now are very hard to come by." I always respected him for that, because what an appropriate thing. And doubly so, where he was.

Q: Coming back to the period of the sixties when the war in Vietnam was moving up in our involvement and all, how did you view it as a senator on the Foreign Relations Committee?

MCGEES: On Foreign Relations and on Appropriations and on reporting, I made a special trip there, not only the first one I talked about before in 1959, but one for Kennedy, two for Lyndon Johnson, and one for Richard Nixon. I had great contact with Nixon. Somehow we got along well. Of course, I first met him up at the Council on Foreign Relations in 1952, when he was running around New York City there in those days. It was a rather sense of continuity, I thought, that linked those chiefs of state pretty much together when it came to Southeast Asia and Vietnam.

In going through these old things, I was rereading some old speeches in the Congressional record. The central theme of that which now recurs as I see this stuff was, "Let's not lose sight of the priorities here. The main problem is China." This was Mao's day.

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Mainland China. “The Chinese are on the move. Vietnam is simply the symbolical grounds on which those clashes are coming together.” That wasn't easy to sell at that time, for obvious reasons. I mean, this was Vietnam. But to me, that was the question, and I said so on the floor again and again. But it became isolated partly because of the phenomena of that time.

What we don't appreciate now, because we take it for granted, and that was instant news. This was the first big thrust in terms of blood and guts on a battlefield on camera, in everybody's living room. That, I think, the more I've reflected on it, was the one almost catastrophic element that was injected when we hadn't learned—we didn't even have TV in Wyoming by that time, but most of the country had it. Instant news. And you didn't have a chance to swallow something or to sort it out, then release it and all that sort of thing. It was there because some reporter put it there, not because the State Department sorted it out and this is what makes sense. That made a great difference, in my view.

Q: You mentioned China. In talking to a diplomatic historian who has looked at some of the oral histories we've done, he said, “One of the things I'd like you to do is to take a look back at the time, and why did we have certain conceptions.”

China was on the move, and yet somebody who maybe knew the area well would say, “The Vietnamese hate the Chinese's guts, no matter whether they're communist or not. The Indonesians hate the Chinese. The Thais.” In other words, looking at it objectively, it seems hard to think of the Chinese really penetrating all these areas, because even their allies on the communist side hated them.

MC GEE: Oh, yes.

Q: But why did we feel that China was moving out?

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MCGEE: This was Maoist China, not Zhou En-lai's China. This was Mao's China. They were indeed moving out, and they were moving, likewise, striving to move west and south, that is, India and those areas. They were aggressive, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Let me turn it around in reverse order, because it gives me a capsule summary. I got to know the president of Singapore while I was in the Senate. He was over here a couple of times, and we had long talks.

Q: President Lee Kuan Yew.

MCGEE: Yes. I've seen him twice over there, and I was over there under the Reagan Administration while I was on the refugee settlement commission and saw him again. We always came back to the same thing that he warned us about when he was here, while I was still in the Senate and the Vietnam thing was hitting the fan. His point was, "We live in terror of the massiveness of Mao's country."

After the war was all over, things were settled. I saw him when I was there on the refugee question. He said, "You know, I've got another phrase that I want to share with you because of all the ruckus your country is going through, other people are going through, because of Vietnam. There's one bottom line. Tell them to read their history books. If you hadn't been there, we wouldn't be here today." He saw it all collapsing through Thailand and all the way down. That was the goal of the Chinese. The question was how you play the balance of mainland China under Mao. Then the change that came with the new regime, when Mao was gone.

Q: There is one school of thought which I have to admit I subscribe, and that is, no matter what you say about Vietnam, it held things together at a time when the forces of whatever you want to call it, basically a communist form of government, were on the march. That stopped it.

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MCGEE: Indeed. In my view, that's . . .

Q: ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, solidify around there.

MCGEE: The Thais were saying this very strongly when I was there three years ago. They just repeated it almost as a routine. Of course, their concern is who's coming across, the Khmer Rouge and that sort of stuff. That's their concern. But nonetheless, they still see the big picture of what the pressure was.

Q: One last question. Could you describe your relationship with Senator Fulbright? What would you say was behind his opposition to particularly President Johnson on this? Was this personal or from deep conviction, or developing conviction?

MCGEE: I think some of it was personal, some of it was as he saw it from where he stood. He was a brilliant man. But likewise, some of it was personal. There was no love lost between LBJ and Bill, of course, and that was always reflected. LBJ often used me to needle him in committee meetings or something. But that's the way they got their kicks. Fulbright and I got along very well, even though he not only did not appoint me to the committee, he kicked me off of the committee in two years. He decided the committee was "too large," so he had to cut off two people. Well, one senator was retiring. I've forgotten who it was now. So he was off. Then he kicked me off of the Foreign Relations Committee. It was two years before I got back on. But it was because I was an academic like he was, but he felt, I guess, that I wasn't getting in line correctly or as much as he would have liked.

Ultimately, we healed all of that over and later on, particularly when he got out of the Senate and I was out of the Senate, we ended up in many of these international groups around town. We had a great time together until I would recite once in a while, as I do, some of the incidents that occurred in foreign relations that suggest that maybe he wasn't totally keeping the lid on in there.

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Q: Can you tell me any particular examples?

MC GEE: Let me mention one, just because it's easy to tell, because it's funny. One day we had Khrushchev coming in to speak, to make an appearance before the committee. That would be way back. 1951 or 1960. So after Khrushchev made a very creditable presentation, why, Fulbright said, "Well, now, I want to turn to the senator from Wisconsin, Senator Wiley." He was the ranking Republican, and therefore, the courtesy was to start with the minority ranking member. "Senator Wiley, will you open the questioning of our distinguished visitor here today?"

Senator Wiley said, "Yes, I've been waiting for that opportunity." Wiley said, "Mr. Khrushchev, why do the Russians drink so much vodka?" We were all kind of shocked by it!

And Khrushchev turns to him and said, "Mr. Senator, if the Russians drank as much vodka as your question seems to suggest, we would never have beaten you to the moon." It was a tremendous retort! And it embarrassed Bill because he felt Wiley had made him look a bit silly. This would have been in the Foreign Relations room right off the corridor there.

When I got on the Vietnam kick, why, just everything came unglued, as far as I was concerned. But I always reminded him, "Bill, you remember we were called down to the White House as members of the Foreign Relations Committee, and we met in a little auditorium down there where they used to assemble folks?" They had the other senators there, but they asked Bill to explain a part of the crisis in Asia, and this was assembled because of the Tonkin Gulf incident. The President was there and wanted to know what our advice would be. We debated the Tonkin Gulf thing and the implications for Southeast Asia. So we voted. Bill said, "It's time now for our vote. I vote 'aye' with the President."

So we all voted "aye," except for Ernest Gruening and Wayne Morse, which was the old pattern. And that's on the record.

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So after that, when we got into Vietnam, I always would throw up to Bill, "You remember that little meeting we had when the President asked us down for his advice on Tonkin Gulf?"

And Bill would say, "Irrelevant. Irrelevant." (Laughs) But he doesn't bother with that anymore. We get along well. That's a true story, but that was the pattern. That was the pattern.

Q: I'm sure I'll be coming back at some point and doing some more.

MC GEE: You'll help me to try to remember some more. I appreciate that, because I haven't done this for a long time.

Q: I want to thank you very much.

End of interview